THE TWO UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE 5TH TRAINING RULE

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The 5th training rule goes as follows:
Surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
and is traditionally translated
«Refraining from alcohol and fermented liquors that cause heedlessness» etc. (see: Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Monastic Code vol 2, p 488)

The argument from harmony

The background for the rule is found in Bhikkhu Vibhaṅga as a result of Venerable Sāgata unintentionally ending up drunk from Kāpotikā. The rule was also given to samaneras together with nine other rules, constituting the traditional «dasasikkhāpada» seen in Mahāvagga (Kd 1.56) and later incorporated in Khuddakapāṭha (KN 1). These two texts would be found in two different parts of Tipitaka: Vinayapitaka and Suttapitaka. The phrase Surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā must therefor be in harmony with both parts. There can not be a contradiction and since we have a clear statement forbidding consuming alcohol in Pātimokkha (surā-meraya-pāne, pācittiaṃ, Pc51) the stress is upon forbidding the cause of heedlessness. Hence: The harmony of the texts causes the rule to be interpreted as refraining from alcohol - and today all substances causing heedlessness.

The argument from grammar

When words are put together creating a composition it will be last part of the composition that define the meaning. We have a very good example of this in the Norwegian composition «sangkor» and «korsang». Here the two words «song» (sang) and «choir» (kor) are put together creating two different compositions. The first will have choir (kor) at the end and then it means «a group of singers», but the last will have song (sang) at the end and then the meaning will be «the song produced by the singers». The meaning has changed from the singers to the song.

We see the same in Pc51 surā-meraya-pāne where pāne defines the drinking of something. And we see the same in the 5th training rule Surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā where the composition is focused on the ending: ṭhānā, saying it is the condition caused that is the focus. From the grammar we should then conclude that the 5th training rule is more about avoiding the condition of heedlessness and not as much the alcohol and other intoxications that may be the cause.

The practical use of the arguments

In teaching the 5th training rule to non-monastics interested in learning meditation and Dhamma and hearing about this rule, they often ask: Can I not even have a glass of wine to the dinner? From the arguments seen we find two answers:

1. The argument of harmony rules the monastic life and here the answer is absolutely NO.
2. The argument of grammar rules the non-monastic life and here the answer is YES but NO to the heedlessness. People are different but in the case of non-monastics the rule does not forbid a glass of wine to the dinner as long as it does not cause heedlessness.